

Formspring: Some see anonymous social networking site Formspring as newest in cyberbullying - chicagotribune.com

"You should kill yourself." It's a message that Vernon Hills police Officer Jim Koch said he sees "all the time" on the one of the newest social networking sites that allow users to post messages anonymously.

Others include "why r u so ugly? i cant find one attractive thing about u," "ur so (bleeping) ugly and stupid! GO THE HELL AWAY! NO ONE LIKES U" and "whats wrong with ur teeth theyre nasty."

Barely a year old, Formspring.me is quickly turning into a sensation, in part because of teenagers who are attracted by the ability to leave their names off their comments.

Formspring boasts nearly 20 million users around the globe, according to a company spokeswoman. The idea of the site is to have a conversation by answering questions stemming from the prompt "Ask me anything." So far, more than 1.5 billion questions have been answered.

"It's like a bathroom wall," said Koch, the school resource officer at Vernon Hills High School. "You write whatever you want."

As a result, nearly every day he is calling students in to talk, on the phone with parents or in the hallways hanging up news stories of teens who committed suicide after being on the receiving end of nasty online remarks.

For parents and school officials who are just catching up with **Facebook**, many are clueless about the relatively new phenomenon.

For some others, the rapidly growing site didn't have a good introduction. Earlier this year, Alexis Pilkington, a 17-year-old from New York,

committed suicide. She had been the victim of hateful remarks, before and after her death, on Formspring and other social networking sites.

As damaging as some of the remarks can be for teens, they can't seem to pull themselves away, Koch said.

"As horrible as it is, as much as we can tell them to stay off the site, they develop an obsession with knowing what people think," he said.

Formspring spokeswoman Sarahjane Sacchetti touts the site's many benefits and says Formspring doesn't want to see the product misused.

An advantage to having such a public site is parents don't have to dig through text messages or hack into Facebook accounts, she suggested.

"Something that may happen on Facebook can happen behind closed doors," Sacchetti said. "Everything that happens on Formspring is open."

Users, who need an account to post comments, can create one with a user name, password and e-mail address. The premise is to ask questions — such as "If you could have been the author of any book, what would it have been?" — on people's pages to learn about them through their answers. The idea is that "curiosity drives engaging, authentic conversations," according to the Web site. By clicking a box, however, the user asking the question, or making a degrading remark, can become anonymous.

As for anonymity being a bad thing, Sacchetti fundamentally disagrees.

"We think anonymity is very positive," she said. "We think most people use it for good."

Questions like "If you could invite one person to dinner, who would it be?" can be benign.

A university in **Vermont** recently used Formspring as a way to allow

prospective students to ask questions about the college they wouldn't necessarily want to ask during a college interview. And a rabbi in New York makes use of the site to answer questions about faith, Sacchetti said.

About 75 percent of questions aren't asked anonymously, she said, and users have the option to stop receiving anonymous comments, block the user or report the comment. The site has a section dedicated to safety, including how to know when you're being harassed and what to do if you feel like you're being bullied.

Alyssa Burrows, 15, a sophomore from Vernon Hills, canceled her Formspring account this fall after a series of insulting comments.

"I didn't understand the concept of it. It just was pointless to me," she said. "I don't need people putting me down."

Her classmate Krishna Mundada, 17, of Vernon Hills, said he witnessed others being bullied, insulted and even stalked on the site.

"It only brings out the coward in people, and it's only making matters worse for everyone," Mundada said.

Brian Mustanski, who only recently heard of Formspring, is an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at the [University of Illinois at Chicago](#) who studies how the Internet affects young people.

Anonymity coupled with a tiny text box can make teens brazen, he said. He likens fascination with the site to a car accident on the side of the road.

"People can't stop looking at it," he said. "In some ways, what is being said is very off-putting, but it's there."

More than 50 percent of Formspring's users in the U.S. fall between ages 13 and 34, according to a Web site that tracks online traffic and demographics.

While Koch estimated that most students at his high school were aware of the site, officials at some school districts across Chicagoland said they hadn't heard of Formspring.

Austin Johnson, the dean at Barrington High School and the district's safety coordinator, said he has seen problems with the site at the high school and middle school level.

"I think it's a convenience thing," he said. "I think the students feel they won't face any consequences for the words they're writing."

A popular type of post is one claiming one person hooked up with another. If the student hears about it at school, the shock and distress are automatically visible, he said. "The rumors always hurt the most," Johnson said.

Whether it's the site's novelty or anonymity, the following is strong.

"You could probably walk into any school in the suburban area, or maybe in the country, and say, 'Have you heard of Formspring?' and they'll say, 'Yes,'" Johnson said. "I don't think they're all using it, but they know what it is."

Johnson first became aware of the site this year, and he's ahead of the curve. "I'm guessing parents may not know it's out there," he said.

In the fast-changing world of social networking, school districts are still trying to keep up. Some don't have cyberbullying policies in place, while others await legal direction from the courts as to how much they can discipline students for posts that are often written in the privacy of students' homes, on personal computers.

The only way a comment appears on a user's account is if he or she responds to it. But sometimes the need to defend oneself is more important than keeping the accusation private.

"I can understand the incredible temptation for teenagers to want to monitor what other people are saying about them," said Elizabeth Saewyc, a professor at the University of British Columbia and expert in youth health and bullying. "From the developmental standpoint, it's that time of life where you're establishing your identity."

In her research of the long-term effects of bullying, she has found a significant increased risk of suicide.

"I certainly don't think that most teens want to be so cruel that they lead to someone's suicide," she said. "When you add anonymity, it adds an additional challenge."

Tribune reporters Gerry Smith and Lolly Bowean and freelance reporter Robert Channick contributed to this report.

deldeib@tribune.com